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ABSTRACT

Based on two years of research experience in Zambia, the author examines ethical and political implications of research inforeign countries. The economic and political reality is that richer, Western countries have the resources to do the research while the poorer countries have the information. Cooperative efforts could alleviate this situation, but often are doomed to be "helping" on the one side and "giving" on the other--at best, a benevolent academic imperialism. Furthermore, once research is accumulated, the findings are not readily available to the host country. Western ideology structures the research questions and interpretations of the answers and, therefore, affects the kind of respect afforded to the participants in the research. Most researchers feel that the information gathered by the research will uplift the people or contribute to their progress. However, any attempt to mold a foreign culture on the basis of Western ideology and values is subject to serious moral question. In many cases, the greatest harm may be done by those who think they are doing good. As long as social sciences are dominated by Westerners, only what Western ideologies can unveil will be discovered. (Author/DE)

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A Study of Mother-Infant Interaction in Zambia:

Personal Dilemmas

by

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A Study of Mother-Infant Interaction in Zambia: Personal Dilemmas

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For two years (1968-1970), I lived and worked in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. My research involved a longitudinal study of 40 Zambian infants from a high-density suburb of Lusaka during the first year of their lives. The study required observations of mother-infant interaction, periodic assessments of infant development, and interviews with mothers. Since all of the data were collected during visits to the home, I had a chance to observe the "real life" environments in which infants were being raised. The contrasts between my previous experiences with infants and my observations in Zambia led me to question assumptions about infant development and care that I didn't even know I had (Goldberg, 1972). The daily problems of trying to do research in an unfamiliar environment forced me to give serious thought to research strategy and methodology. In the years after my return, I also thought a great deal about the ethical and political implications of my work situation in Zambia. It seemed to me that I had gained and taken away far more than I had given and left behind. These apparently diverse concerns have been in my thoughts for the

last five years, so what I have to say today is a sharing of ideas which have had a long germination period.

Ideology and Social Science

Anyone who has taught psychology in a non-Western setting must be acutely aware that it is very much a Western enterprise shaped by Western ideologies. Those of us who do research carry these ideologies into our work, often unwittingly. If we work in other cultures, what we do, what we see, and what we can learn is determined by ideology. In the United States and in Britain, the prevailing ideology is a competitive one (Reigel, 1974). One succeeds only in comparison with others and our approach to child development reflects this attitude. One is rewarded for individual achievement and the hallmark of achievement is doing it before everyone else. Indeed the word "competence" and "compete" share a common Latin root. Our concern is for individual accomplishment regardless of the consequences to the group, though in many non-Western cultures, the shared concerns of the group are primary (Hsu, 1973). Our approach to infant development is a reflection of this attitude and the thrust of much research is to see whether development can be accelerated (e.g. White, 1969). It is accepted by many that more rapid development is better development.

It is not surprising then, that many studies of African infants focus upon comparisons with European infants to see which group is more precocious (Warren, 1972). Everything we believe leads us to expect that African infants, without the benefits of modern medicine and our notion of a balanced diet, should lag behind more privileged Europeans. If the reverse is found to be the case, we do not decide that European infants are retarded. We conclude that European infants are normal and African infants who are more advanced, are extraordinary.

This is characteristic of our tendency to take Western experience to be "normal" and label other patterns "deviant". The concept of intelligence, for example, has come to mean possession of these skills which ensure success in Western school systems. We judge the intelligence of others by these standards, rather than by the skills which are valued in their cultures (Tulkin & Konner, 1973). Even where attempts are made to adapt our approach to local experience, the premises remain Western. When I was testing infants in Zambia, I tried to use familiar materials wherever possible. I continued to use inanimate objects although I felt the social domain was more salient for these infants. Only later, after Dasen (1973) made the same observation in his work with Ivorian infants, did I realize that I could have used

this knowledge in my testing. Social stimuli would have been more appropriate for the infants I studied.

Several recent papers have commented that in many cultures, both children and adults are more responsive to the social domain than the physical where we have assessed skills which only relate to the physical world (Cole, 1973; Hsu, 1973). By and large we have failed to study the area of development acknowledged to be a major failure in industrialized cultures: personal relationships. Often where we do study personal relationships in infancy, as I did in Zambia, it is to assess their influences on cognitive development (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1974; Bell, 1970; Goldberg, in press; Lewis & Goldberg, 1969).

Ethics in the Field

Thus, Western assumptions bias the questions we ask and the interpretations we make of the answers. But even more important, our ideologies structure the evaluations we make of others, and therefore, the kind of respect we can accord to them.

Care of infants by multiple caretakers is the norm in many parts of the world, including Zambia. Yet, most Western psychologists consider multiple caretaking a "deprivation" condition and discuss it accoridngly. It has not really occurred to us that by Zambian standards American infants are

"deprived" of social stimulation.

In the past few years, psychologists have become more concerned about the ethics of the researcher - "researchee" relationship. Various documents have been published with recommendations on major issues. These include such matters as the confidentiality of information gathered by a researcher, the kind of information an investigator should provide to the participants, and the appropriate compensation for participants. These issues should be of special concern to those of us who work in other cultures. If nothing else, the unwitting assumptions we make about normality and pathology, about success and failure, may easily lead us to exploit those we do not consider equals.

Ordinarily, participation in research is a voluntary activity. An individual decides to participate on the basis of information provided by the investigator. However, it is often the case that participants have little knowledge of what has actually been taken from them. It is not that social scientists are all deliberate deceivers. Our sins are more often the sins of omission rather than those of commission. Usually we are concerned that we will make people unnecessarily self conscious, or assume that people are not sophisticated enough to understand the details wo we leave out some information that we might provide. In non-industrialised

countries, we are even more likely to omit information. We may assume that even the elite have little basis for understanding our research. In my study, infants were observed in their homes. We also observed and recorded information about mothers. However, we rarely told mothers that they were being watched. This was deception and I felt uncomfortable about it. At the time, I assumed that this was essential to the conduct of research. Part of our ideology says that you cannot trust what you see when people know you are watching. In fact, where American mothers in this situation would have assumed I was at least noticing them, Zambian mothers were delightfully unconcerned. On one occasion a mother used the research visit as a convenient baby-sitting device and announced that she would do some errands while we were busy with the baby. On another, a mother of twins spent the entire observation period nursing the twin we were not observing. Nevertheless, I am still uneasy for perhaps these mothers would now be embarrassed or shocked to know that we recorded these events.

Often researchers are permitted to observe events which would ordinarily be private. Some of us have been present, for example, at births, where even the infant's father and siblings are usually excluded. At the very least we have

to believe we are doing no harm, for we are intervening in the lives of others. We are there when normally we would not be. I believed that whatever disruptions attended my observations were minimal and relatively unimportant. As a psychologist, I did my best to be distant and objective and to avoid involvement. While anthropologists and sociologists are often allowed and encouraged to be participant-observers, the ideology of psychology tells us to remain apart from what we observe. Ainsworth,(1973), has suggested that if a study involves repeated observations at hime, it may be unethical to be uninvolved. It is very threatening for someone to sit and take notes without ever reacting to what happens. Indeed, in the name of research, we behave in ways that would ordinarily be considered very peculiar, if not inhuman. This must be very disturbing to a family. Paradoxically, Ainsworth also suggested that the effects of potential disruptions may be minimized by longer and more frequent visits. As the observer becomes more familiar, the threat value of being ovserved may diminish. However, more natural behavior and involvement on the part of the observer can also minimize such threats. We must, therefore, give serious consideration to the appropriate behavior and attitudes for observers.

In a relatively unfamiliar culture, it is even more difficult to sense what is an invasion of privacy, what is

offensive, and what is appropriate. In most of the homes I visited in Zambia, a male may not visit a woman's house when her husband is absent without violating a family's sense of propriety. There is no reason to think that being a doctor or a psychologist or an anthropologist overrides such customs. Therefore, the question of who is collecting data may be a very sensitive one. For the two years that I worked in the same suburb, my visits never ceased to be a novelty and the center of great excitement. Children of all ages would follow us about and try to touch my hair. There were always a few who ran off only to return with their mothers to point at the European lady. At our 9-month visits, infants exhibited rather intense stranger anxiety to me and to my Zambian assistants, though it was always more marked toward me. It would have been a more efficient data collection process and one less disruptive of family and community life, if I had remained in my office at the university. Since the actual handling and testing of infants was always done by two Zambian women, I was not a necessary part of the process. I wanted more direct contact with families and with the community than numbers collected by someone else would give me, but there were undoubtedly some costs attached to my direct involvement.

Another issue involves compensation. Usually we exchange money or services or even academic credits for

the time and information that participants contribute. In other cultures these forms may be inappropriate. Often people can make clear what they wish in exchange. Ainsworth (1967) found that the Ganda mothers in her study were so eager for information about feeding and nutrition that the design of the study had to be changed so that this could be provided. To refuse such information was unethical. It would also have been impossible to maintain co-operation in a research project without meeting this need. Sometimes the exchange expected by participants presents unforeseen difficulties. Leiderman (1973) found that his wife was expected to provide transportation to the hospital when needed by residents of the village in Kenya where he worked. We gave a toy to each infant at the end of our study and Polaroid pictures to the families which seemed to please mothers. Nevertheless, I was always troubled by the thought that medical needs seemed to be much more pressing. Although I was not qualified to provide medical care, I felt that for another study of this type, I would want to mount an inter-disciplinary effort which would include a qualified pediatrician.

Compensation to individual participants is, of course, important. Even more important is the return to the community and the host country. In industrialized countries where a great deal of research is carried out, it is generally

assumed that in the long run, society as a whole benefits from the findings of research projects. When Westerners do research in less wealthy nations and take the data home to analyse, the benefits generally accrue to Western science and Western life-styles. The host country may have little access to the information gathered. Even in Western countries, the findings of research studies are not readily available to participants. When they are, they are often of little immediate use or applicability. When a country has permitted outsiders to do research without any return of information, there may be increasing resentment at the diversion of local resources and talent to foreign interests.

Recently, for example, the New York Times (September 1, 1974) printed a small item about the result of exploitation by social scientists in Canada's Northwest Territories. It seems that the Eskimos and Indians get tired of being overrun by anthropologists and answering the same questions over and over without ever seeing the findings. Hereafter, social scientists wishing to do research in this area must apply for a license from local authorities. A detailed proposal must be submitted and the local board may reject projects that are judged to threaten daily life. Furthermore, the researcher who is licensed is required to submit progress

reports to the licensing board. Similar application procedures exist for research projects on Kibbutz life in Israel and I encountered similar procedures in the black community of Springfield, Massachusetts.

These examples suggest that many groups of people who have been studied repeatedly are now wary of being exploited. They are insisting on some input and control of projects that concern them. I find this attitude refreshing and far preferable to second-guessing on such matters, but it will also require researchers to consult local personnel in the process of research design.

Doing Good

As social scientists, few of us have any intention of changing the people we study. Yet the foregoing examples show that those who have been studied repeatedly often feel their way of life is threatened by the process. When I interviewed mothers about weaning practices in Zambia, it was clear that few of them had weaned their infants at one year or had thought about it. Most did not seem concerned about when the child "should" be weaned. After the interviews I began to wonder whether extensive questioning about child care practices may not lead mothers to be more critical of their current methods or subtly suggest to them that something else may be preferable. Though such

interviews appear to be harmless, they may also serve to initiate change.

Furthermore, what we as social scientists consider "good" may be rejected by others. Many of us believe that in exchange for the time and information people give us, we should try to "do good" or "uplift" the people we study. (Of course, only those who are inferior can be uplifted. We never speak of uplifting our equals). The greatest harm may be done by those who think they are doing good. During my stay in Zambia, I occasionally hosted other researchers in my field. On one occasion when I escorted some American Colleagues to a Zambian farmer's home, they were offered a basket of eggs. They began to refuse, feeling that they could do good by saving a few more eggs for the family. The insult of refusing a gift, however, would have been far more important to that family than the few extra eggs. Ainsworth (1967) was advised not to bring milk powder to the babies she visited. The mothers would use it while it was free, but could not afford to buy it on their own when she left. A child might become dependent on this gift and suffer serious nutritional problems when it was no longer available.

We will disagree about what we can contribute to the people we study without doing harm by doing good. Whiting (1973) has said that the most important thing he can give

away with a clear conscience is knowledge of scientific method. This requires the training and development of local scholars and making research findings broadly available to local people. I am less sanguine about this. For example, training scholars means some input in local school systems which can become meddling. But we can also ask, isn't spreading behavioral scientists around the world tantamount to spreading Western ideology?

Research and Politics

It is impossible to do research without politics. Scientific research was once the exclusive province of wealthy gentlemen who could afford to support themselves. Today, science is supported by governments, and by public and private foundations; wealth and power continue to determine what is done. In recent years, Western research literature has been filled with studies of minority group children. Why? Because there is money available for intervention research. Often this means research aimed at shaping minority group children in the image of the white middle class. We are still ready to assume the model in which deviation from white middle class behavior is considered pathological. The rationale for such research is that ostensibly it will increase these children's chances to succeed in the system. Most of the scientists who engage

in this kind of research believe they are doing good. But if they succeed, perhaps they will also succeed in alienating poor children from their parents and their ethnic origins. It rarely occurs to us that the system may be changed, that the fault may be in the system, not in the children. That is part of the ideology: the belief that the system is good and right and that such interventions are in the interest of progress. We may, in fact, be doing harm by doing good. It is rich and powerful nations that can afford to send researchers to other countries. Thus, Americans can do research in Third World countries, but rarely does an African or Asian come to study Americans. The British and French send researchers to their former colonies, but how often does someone from the former colonies come to study the British or the French? Even with the most careful efforts at cooperation between scholars of different nations, the economic and political reality is that it is the richer country that has the resources to do research and it is the poorer country that has the information. Co-operative efforts in this climate are doomed to be "helping" on one side, and "giving" on the other (Tajfel, 1968), at best, a benevolent academic imperialism. Even within the rich nations, where power and resources are increasingly available to social scientists so that they will solve our social problems, the poor get

the short end of the stick. The result is an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the "helpers" at the expense of those who are "helped" (Richards, 1973). It is clear that research on minority groups in the United States raises precisely the same kinds of issues as research in other countries. We may even sin more seriously at home where we wrongly assume common background and a shared language.

It has often been suggested that developing collegial relations with local scholars may provide resolution on many ethical and methodological issues as well as contributing new perspectives to research. But political reality interferes with egalitarian collegial relations. Non-white social scientists have often felt that while they are encouraged to study their own cultures, it is in the role of providing information to the "real" (white male) social scientists (Hsu, 1973; Jones, 1970). It is a sobering thought that a 1973 conference I attended on "cultural and social influences in infancy and early childhood" consisted only of white Westerners and with few exceptions, exclusively from the United States. Few of us thought to suggest our local colleagues as participants, myself included. This sheds a harsh light on the nature of collegial relations between researchers from wealthy nations

and those from the poor.

A Western scientist need have no desires to intervene in the interests of social change or political causes. But the very fact that we can invite ourselves to poor countries to do research is political reality. Anthropology, remarked LeVine, (1973) would not exist now if we had waited for people to invite research in their communities. Social science may represent a threat to the status quo. There is always the possibility that careful scrutiny by an outsider will reveal what governments would prefer to hide. Invited or not, social scientists who have financial support from governments or foundations can go. Once there, a social scientist may actually lend repressive governments validity. Social scientists have worked in countries with oppressive minority governments and allowed their presence, their money spent, and their subsequent silence to lend tacit support and approval to such governments. While anthropology gave us "cultural relativism" it had its origins in colonial history. Often anthropologists were sent to their country's colonies to discover information which would help control local populations. Reverence for traditional cultures can still serve to support and maintain existing colonial and neo-colonial conditions (Gjessing, 1968; Jones, 1970). It is not surprising that social scientists are sometimes suspected of being intelligence

agents of their governments.

Conclusions

What does all this have to do with the goals and methods of research? It may seem that I have been speaking of matters which are increasingly peripheral, if not extraneous, to the research enterprise. However, political realities have theoretical implications. If Westerners are allowed to study both their own cultures and those of others while scientists from poorer nations can only work at home, an important perspective is missing. Both "insiders" and "outsiders" must contribute to our understanding human behavior. For example, I have often thought that if psychology had originated in Zambia, our concerns would be quite different today. We would have assumed from the start that contact comfort was essential for the development of infant-mother relationships. The role of feeding, if considered at all, would have been discovered only recently. The ideologies of different cultures should lead to different approaches to human behavior, different problems for study, and different styles of research. We have, at present, few clues as to what these might be because many possibilities are now ignored. As long as social science is dominated by Westerners, we will discover only what Western ideologies unveil. When we are willing to lay ourselves open to the scrutiny of others as they do for us, we will understand ourselves very differently.

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